DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 298 591 CS 506 363

AUTHOR Perrott, Christine
TITLE Better Discussion. Item 14, SET: Research Information for Teachers. Number One, 1988.
INSTITUTION Australian Council for Educational Research, Hawthorn.; New Zealand Council for Educational Research, Wellington.
PUB DATE 88
NOTE 7p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Communication; Classroom Techniques; *Discussion (Teaching Technique); Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; Naturalistic Observation; Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS Australia; New Zealand

ABSTRACT

This pamphlet maintains that genuine discussions require a different agenda and teacher approach from other types of classroom sessions, and uses actual classroom transcripts as evidence and illustration. The first section, "Discussion as a Special Event," analyzes the patterns of common classroom interactions, finding a formal and strongly rule-governed pattern in which the teacher has a didactic stance, does most of the talking, asks nearly all the questions, and controls the way the talk develops. This discourse pattern, termed "instructional talk," as well as another pattern termed "cohorting" (treating the pupils as an undifferentiated group), are inhibiting to genuine discussion. The second section, called "Achieving Genuine Discussion," presents two basic suggestions: (1) change the agenda (stop taking a didactic stance, directly evaluating each reply, and controlling the discourse); and (2) play the right game (avoid having a particular response in mind as "the right answer"). The third section offers specific ideas for promoting classroom discussion. Notes include ten references to books and articles representing socio-linguistic classroom research. (SR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Item 14

set research information for teachers
number one 1988

Better Discussion

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Christine Perrott
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

By Christine Perrott

Armidale CAE

ED298591

Discussion and classrooms

AN EVERYDAY DISCUSSION involves an issue and a sense of argument and debate, examination and consideration. Hence we say that something is 'under consideration' or 'open to discussion' and mean that it has in some sense been undecided or unresolved. In discussion we offer views and ideas, and consider and comment on the views and ideas of the others.

Many teachers are disappointed with the quantity and quality of interaction when their classes are discussing something. Although where the children sit and the types of questions the teacher asks are important, this article is about improving discussion by giving attention to the overall nature of the discourse. The good news is that most of the discourse factors that inhibit good classroom discussion can be altered without undue difficulty.

One of the best ways to illustrate how this can be achieved is by examining actual classroom transcripts.

Discussion as a Special Event

ANALYSIS OF CLASSROOM TRANSCRIPTS from a wide variety of classrooms in a range of schools in a number of countries has shown that classroom discourse is patterned and unfolds in similar ways. In the usual classroom lesson the interaction follows a formal and strongly rule-governed pattern: the teacher has a didactic stance,

CS506363

does most of the talking, asks nearly all the questions and controls the way the talk develops. Pupils respond rather than initiate. This type of discourse can be termed 'instructional talk'. We tend to retain this form of classroom talk when we come to do discussion lessons.

This is largely because particular discourse procedures and certain ways of interacting in classrooms have become ingrained. However, these common ways of interacting in classrooms are not conducive to discussion. In fact they tend to be inhibiting and constraining. Genuine discussion tends to occur only when the usual classroom discourse 'rules' do not hold sway.

The first transcript is a good example of usual classroom discourse. It illustrates the common pattern of classroom talk.

Actual Transcript
Year 4 (Std. 3)
The Shipwreck

t	Right. Why did the captain think he couldn't have been on a raft for four weeks?	Initiation
p	He looked too well.	Reponse
t	Right! Imagine if you'd been on a raft for four weeks. You probably wouldn't look too good. He was looking OK because he had plenty of . . .	Evaluation I script filling
p	Food.	R
t	Yes. And . . .	E I
p	Water.	R
t	(nods) and . . .	E I
p	Fish?	R
t	Yes. And . . .	E I
p	Chewing gum?	R
t	(laughs) Chewing gum wouldn't help that much! But what else?	E
p	Rest.	R
t	Yes. You need rest, and he walked around and kept himself fit. OK.	E (Transformation. Is this the answer the teacher really wanted?)

Note the repetitive teacher-pupil (t-p-t) or initiation-response-evaluation (i-r-e) pattern in the turn-taking. Also, the teacher has the pupils 'filling in the script' of the discourse, e.g.:

'Because he had plenty of . . .'

'Yes. And . . .'

Consequently the pupils use very brief responses and initiate little. At the end the teacher transforms into her own words the child's response 'Rest' so that it becomes 'he walked around and kept himself fit.' This, it appears, was the answer the teacher wanted all along. Of course, this excerpt is a comprehension exercise given after pupils have read a story and is not a discussion. However, this type of interaction structure tends to become ingrained into our teaching and it is clearly not conducive to discussion. In good discussion we hope for complex responses from pupils, some pupil initiation of ideas, expression of their own positions or opinions and even an attempt to defend or justify these.

Another feature common to classroom interchange, and also inhibiting to genuine discussion, is the use of what has been called 'cohorting'. This refers to treating the pupils as an undifferentiated group, moving together, changing activity together, and having to bid to speak or to express opinion. The next transcript, from Year 6 (Form 1), illustrates this. The only individual opinions to escape from the tightly controlled structure are Susan's 'Although' and another pupil's 'The second one'.

Actual Transcript
Year 6 (Form 1)
Joining Sentences

t	Susan what are you doing? What did you use for this one?
p	Although
t	Hands up those who used it to join the two sentences.
ps	(hands up)
t	Hands up if you used 'although' another way
ps	(hands up)
t	Read it to us
p	(reads sentence)
t	Which sentence do you prefer – Karen?
p	The second one.
t	Who agrees?
ps	(hands up)
t	Who likes the other?
ps	(hands up)
t	I think it's probably a case of personal preference. Who used something other than 'although'? etc.

Cohorting occurs in classroom discourse more often than we realise. I suggest you take a tape of your own classroom and you will no doubt find this is so in your case too. It has its purposes, but it is not conducive to good discussion.

Achieving Genuine Discussion

IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE GENUINE DISCUSSION in the classroom, a conscious effort is required to break out of the mechanisms of i-r-e instructional talk and cohorting. Discussion has to be seen as a different discourse event in the classroom. In particular the interaction must be organised differently and left to develop in a less controlled manner. Below are two basic suggestions on how this can be achieved.

1. Change the agenda

Discussion is not a matter of giving each pupil a say on a topic, or checking how well the pupils are grasping a concept or generalisation. Concern with these objectives often overrides the establishment of an agenda which will assist the development of genuine discussion. Below is a transcript of a lesson which had the goal of encouraging discussion about features of a school the pupils had just seen depicted on film. Unfortunately the agenda organised by the teacher had a different outcome.

Actual Transcript
Year 4 (Standard 3)
Similar Schools

t Hand up if you haven't answered anything.
ps (chatter, some put up hands)
t Right Daniel. Tell me something in their school that was similar to our school.
p (no response)
t What did they have in their school similar to ours? Excuse me! Hold your tongue Philip!
p I can't think.
t Stand up. Pr'aps that'll help you think.
p (stands)
t Penny?
p They have sport.
t Yes. (nods to another pupil)
p They have craft.
t Yes. (nods to pupil who is to answer)
p They have music.
y Yes. So they have subjects that are . . .
ps (in chorus) The same as ours.
t Jackie?
p (no response)
t I'll come back (nods towards another pupil)
p They have a hall.
t Daniel?
p (no response)
t I'll be back.
p They've got horses.
t Have we got horses near our school?
p No.
t You're onto different – we're onto the same.
p They have uniforms.
t Yes they have uniforms.
p They have lunch inside.
t Yes they have lunch inside like us. What else?
p They play the same sort of games.
(continues in the same vein)

This lesson, far from being the intended discussion, is more like an interrogation session. Note the presence of many anti-discussion characteristics.

- the t-p-t pattern
- the script-filling: 'Yes. So they have subjects that are . . .
- the didactic stance of the teacher and consequent lack of alternative possibilities for pupil talk
- the lack of pupil initiation and the brevity of their responses.

It is clear that the agenda here is little different from that of 'non-discussion' lessons. Participants' views are not canvassed and the teacher asks questions whose answers she already knows (and the pupils no doubt realise this).

The use of more open and challenging questions will help change the agenda: Why do you think both of us have lunch inside? However it also involves setting a scene where the teacher becomes a discussion promoter rather than an instructor. To achieve this we must stop taking a *didactic* stance, directly *evaluating* each reply, and *controlling* the discourse. How could this be done in this instance? Perhaps the lesson could begin with brainstorming (a flood of suggestions, all accepted and listed) about the similarities. Then the teacher could set the scene for a discussion of 'why the same?' by letting the group choose one of the brainstormed points to consider and talk about. Relinquishing control of the discourse is not easy but can be safely done. Here are some hints: (1) do not intersperse a comment each time a pupil responds; (2) avoid too much eye contact when a pupil speaks (so the pupil is not encouraged to refer responses to the teacher in expectation of an evaluative comment); (3) do not require pupils to bid to speak (e.g., by hands up); (4) oversee special ground rules (such as: wait while another makes a point; respond to that point or make a related point; support what you say); (5) resist the habit of having a preconceived notion of what makes a 'good answer' and instead concentrate on what makes a well made point. Such an interaction might proceed thus:

Possible Transcript
Year 4 (Standard 3)
Uniforms

t OK, so we've chosen to think about uniforms and why both their school and ours have them. Any ideas?
p It shows where you go to school.
t [resist comment! at the most offer a non-committal 'umm'. Wait *much* longer than you feel comfortable with for a new response. If this doesn't work say something like 'Is that a good thing?' and again wait a long time. Look around the whole group expectantly and encouragingly.]
p Yes.
t [If this is all that a pupil has said you'll need to show the ground rules and say quickly 'you'll need to tell us why Greg.' or 'Someone else can if they like.' if Greg is struck dumb.]
p I agree 'cause it's good if you get lost.
t [Resist comment! Wait!]
p But you can say where you live!
t [Resist comment! Wait!]
p The bus knows what school to let you out at in the morning, though.
p Yeah, that's true.
t [Might have to come in as leader and provide some impetus.
e.g., 'What ideas have you as to why we both have uniforms?
or 'Perhaps some of you think uniforms are a bad thing.'
Wait – use that encouraging look.]

Whatever approach into the discussion is decided by the teacher, the activity needs to involve a conscious effort to become a *discussion leader* and not an information giver or evaluator. This requires formulating an agenda and ground rules which are noticeably different to those common to most instructional talk in classrooms.

2. Play the right game

The chief objectives of discussion sessions in classrooms are usually to have pupils think for themselves, to consider the viewpoints put by others, fairly and intelligently, and to come up with some concluding position, or new understanding, or new learning. A genuine discussion is a type of reasoning and reflective game and is thus a very suitable vehicle for achieving these objectives.

Often classroom discussions turn into a different type of game which can be called the 'guess what's in teacher's mind' game (the GWITM game). When this occurs the pupils are concentrating their thinking not on considering

their own position or the contributions of others but on discovering the answers and ideas that the teacher is hoping for and will accept most eagerly. When this occurs the pupils seldom think up and verbalise their own ideas.

Below is a classroom transcript which is an example of the GWITM game. It is about a mining company amd is from a Year 6 (Form 1) class. It is very obviously a GWITM game, with the 'correct' outcome being 'something that starts with R'.

Actual Transcript
Year 6 (Form 1)
Mining Town

(Lesson has been going for 15 minutes.)

t So we need a town and what's a town, L?
p People living together, roads, houses and shops.
t OK so the company has to build a town for the people to live in. But, if your parents were to go there what would they need?
Sit down, N!
p A car.
t Yes.
p Shops.
t Yes.
p Water supply.
t Yes. What else would be needed, M? Stand up those who are talking while M is talking. What do you have to say that's so important to be rude, C?
p I just said he's cute (giggles).
t Carry on M.
p Place to live, to shop.
t Are there any other things . . . I've spoken to you *twice*, C! Is there anything else.
p Power.
t Yes.
p Transport.
t Yes. What do you think would be the main transport?
p Railway.
t Yes. Hands up who thinks Rail would be the major form.
p Planes?
t Hands up who thinks planes . . . Yes so we need an airport too. Do you have other needs than a place to live, things to eat?
p Schools.
t Yes.
p Toilets.
t Yes.
p Medical services.
t Right. And ambulances and others . . .
p People to prepare food.
t Right. But there's one *very* essential need no one's mentioned.
p Clothes.
t No. Another one.
p Petrol pumps and things.
t No. It starts with "R", the one, I'm thinking of. E?
p Rivers (audible sigh from class).
t Now E! We're 6th grade. Surely if we're going to say something it is sensible! Well perhaps it's not something *you* need, but I know it *is* one of your needs, so think about it.
p Roads.
t Well, M? (chatter) Stop it till every one is quiet. Alright, M., something starting with R that people need.
p (calling out) Rubbish.
t M? Not that! (no response)
t Alright we're getting nowhere, so we'll come back . . . we need to face the situation that to make a mine down here first of all a town has to be made and then transport for people to get to the mine and for the ore to be moved out. So it requires planning and much capital. So if a company starts it, it has to be sure of money. Also, how would the ore be moved from the area?
p Trucks.
t Yes, but we'd need lots of roads. What is a more *obvious* way?
p Boats.
t Yes. So we need a port. Yes . . . Would you go and see that we can have the Song books please T: Sit down you two! Has anyone thought of the R word for the need people have? Think about it so that you can think of the word I'm about to say. C?
p Rain.
t Yes, we definitely need rain but that's not it.
I'm not going to tell you the word I'm thinking of and when we come back to it . . . perhaps . . . yes L?
p (inaudible)
t (ignores) Alright. Would you all please put your things off the desk so that we have no distractions for our singing programme.

The outcome of GWITM games can be that the teacher does most of the thinking because the pupils tend to tag along with the teacher's plans. Obviously they are playing the wrong game for it to become a genuine discussion. The teacher remains the instructor under the guise of leading a discussion.

The solutions to this problem are relatively simple. If the teacher does want a particular response outcome then the lesson cannot become a real discussion. Perhaps too there are quicker and better ways of reaching a wanted response than the GWITM game, e.g., a series of direct questions can be asked and children can research it in other ways. Some topics will not lend themselves to discussion in the sense it is meant here, and to try to make them do so will be a lost cause. If the teacher hopes for the development of a genuine discussion then it is essential to avoid having a particular response or responses in mind as 'what I want'. Of course you still need to encourage well made points and thoughtful, fair comments by participants; there is no need to relinquish your role as a guide and promoter of correct Learning. However, it is vital that you allow for open-endedness in the discourse. If a general understanding is hoped for, (e.g., the infrastructure new settlements need, or the differences between living and non-living things) then the paths to this through genuine discussion can be various and need not follow the way you expect. You have to be prepared to sit aside and relax control of the discourse for true discussion to ensue. You might even learn something from the pupils!

Below is an extract from an introduction to a Year 6 (Form 1) lesson on how to calculate an average. Although not a topic one would usually associate with discussion, this teacher has managed to move towards this mode before he goes onto the more instructional section of the lesson.

The features of this transcript that indicate this are: 1. more conversational tenor; 2. an opening question ('What do you know about averages, Bruce?') which signals acceptance of a range of responses; 3. t steps out of the discourse after asking Cameron to give an example and a number of pupils initiate ideas; 4. no set 'script' that the pupils are following; 5. extended answers from pupils.

Actual Transcript
Year 6 (Form 1)
Averages

t What do you know about averages, Bruce?
p It's like a percentage.
t Well... um... yes... right... but what else?
p The usual amount?
t Well that's like an average in a way.
p It tells you if we get our marks and then we get an average.
t Yes. That's the closest yet. Good! If we have a certain group or class the average is to do with that group or class. It doesn't tell us about each of the marks. Some get over the average and others lower. So what is it?
p The middle?
t Yes. And what use is it to us? It's alright to say it's interesting mathematically but what use can it be?
p (puzzled silence)
t What if this week the average was lower than last week?
p It'd show whether we were better than last week.
t Yes. Yes. And what about *out* of school? Cameron?
ps (Cameron tells of a business proprietor who could use it to see if his business is improving. Another child then tells of his parents wanting to know the average cost on a trip, how much a day, and the average use of petrol per kilometre.)
t Yes we actually did that, didn't we, for our trip? Remember?
p You can work out averages of tests.
t Yes. I can do that with your marks over a few weeks.
p And builders. They sometimes give quotes on averages. You know, they have to use it to tell how much it'd cost.
t That's a very good one, isn't it? He needs to be sure his quote is not a wild guess. So an average is to do with a group. It tells you about the group.
p A bricklayer, Mr G? A bricklayer, he needs to get an average to get enough bricks for his men... like how many usually each day.
t Yes. There's just one other example I can think of that's very common and that's in the weather. They say what the temperature is to be and then says (sic) what the average is. They get this from collecting a lot of temperatures adding them all up, and then divide them by how many temperatures we have. Right. Then how do we work out an average? Sharon? Sharon! that's three times I've had to talk to you!
p We take the numbers.
t Yes. We need a series of numbers. And then what do we do?
p (inaudible)
t Yes, we add them up. And than what? (continues in the demonstration vein)

Some Specific Ideas

To encourage pupils to express opinions and support them. Before trying whole group discussions use this trio activity. Divide the pupils into groups of three and designate the members of each Trio as A, B, and C. Announce a topic, e.g., 'Having no school uniform', and have each pupil in each Trio state in turn their view to the other two pupils and their reason for it. To help them you could give the model 'I think... because...' You just supervise as the Trios do this concurrently in different spots in the room.

To encourage pupil–pupil interaction. Use the Trio idea again at first. Choose an issue or topic, e.g., 'What's one important difference between living and non-living things?' and, beginning with say pupil A. Have A express a viewpoint. Then have B, then C comment, agree or disagree. Encourage use of reasons each time here also. Then move onto another topic and begin with, say, pupil B, with pupils C and A commenting in turn.

To help pupils refrain from speaking over each other and to wait and listen before contributing. Have the groups pretend that there is a recorder noting the discussion points. This can be a pretend person or an imaginary technological device. Explain that if they talk when someone else is speaking the recording will become impossible. Say 'Remember the poor recorder' if pupils speak over one another.

To enhance your role as discussion leader. Have the pupil speaking look around the whole group as they do so, and encourage the listeners to look directly at this speaker. Avoid eye contact yourself if the speaker turns constantly to you expecting your response.

To help the shy and reticent pupil. Establish a role play situation, e.g., a parents' meeting to decide whether this new school should have uniforms, why and, if so, what type. Play a role yourself, not necessarily the chair but this would do. Stay in this role and don't revert to 'teacher'. Play out the discussion in this created scene. You can call on the shy pupil in his/her role (e.g., 'What do you think Mrs Brown?') and there will usually be less fear of expressing opinion.

To get pupils started with genuine discussion. Choose an experience or problem directly related to the pupils' daily concerns and interests, e.g., 'What should the canteen be allowed to sell?'

To avoid playing the GWITM game. Make a conscious effort to choose a topic, problem or issue to which you yourself see no one right answer, or about which you are not entirely decided.

To impress on pupils that everyone's ideas count. Let everyone have a chance to express a view at the end, either orally or in writing. Don't be judgemental about these and if possible give the impression that they are to some extent hypothetical.

To help you step out of the instructor role. Play 'pass the turn'. Here you have each speaker nominate the next respondant by saying something like 'What do you think of this G?' or 'What comment would you like to make G?' Another 'pass the turn' game involves giving pupils a turn at being discussion leaders instead of yourself.

Conclusion

Genuine discussions require a different agenda and teacher approach from other types of classroom sessions. They involve attention to the stance and role the teacher takes, to the 'rules' which operate over the interaction, and to the 'correct' or 'best' answer. Some topics are not suitable for discussion sessions. Thought should be given to this and to the relationship between one's objectives and the appropriateness of discussion in adequately achieving them. Too often we kid ourselves on this one!

Notes

Christine Perrott is Senior Lecturer at the Centre for Education Studies, Armidale College of Advanced Education, Armidale, NSW, Australia 2350.

The research from which the transcripts are taken can be read in *Teachers' Beliefs about Learning and Knowledge and their Manifestation in Primary School Classrooms*, unpublished PhD thesis, Armidale: University of New England, 1985.

Until relatively recently most studies of classroom interaction used Flanders' Interaction Analysis technique. This involves coding and classifying interaction at regular intervals to make a type of score sheet which reveals the extent of pupils' talk and its type (questions, responses, asides, etc.,) and similarly teachers' talk. This method is limited in the specific guidance it can give teachers. However, it can be seen at work in the following:

- Amidon, E. and Hunter, E. (1976) *Improving Teaching: The Analysis of Verbal Interaction*, London: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

My own research has followed the more socio-linguistic approach which has gained currency over the last decade. There is a growing interest in careful, in-depth examination of classroom contexts and interrelationships in order to illuminate classroom life and learning. Studies into classroom discourse have contributed to this illumination. Examples of such research are:

Books

Delamont, S. (ed) 1984 *Readings on Interaction in the Classroom*, London: Methuen.

Edwards, A.D. and Furlong, V.J. 1978 *The Language of Teaching*, London: Heinemann.

Mehan, H. 1979 *Learning Lessons*, Harvard University Press.

Sinclair, J. McH. and Bragil, D. 1982 *Teacher Talk*, Oxford University Press.

Stubbs, M. 1976 *Language, Schools and Classrooms*, London: Methuen.

Articles

Edwards, A.D. 1980 Patterns of Power and Authority in Classroom Talk, in P. Wood (ed) *Teacher Strategies: Explorations in the Sociology of the School*, London: Croom Helm.

Hammersley, M. 1977 The organisation of pupil participation, in *Social Review*, Vol. 1, pp. 355–367.

Perrott, C. 1984 Classroom discourse analysis as an adjunct to the illumination of the teacher-learning process, in *The Journal of Teaching Practice*, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 43–64.

Stubbs, M. 1976 Keeping in touch: Some Functions of Teacher Talk, in M. Stubbs and S. Delamont (eds) *Explorations in Classroom Observation*, New York: Wiley.

For additional ideas on improving the verbal interaction in your classroom, refer to

Perrott, C. 1988 *Classroom Talk and Pupil Learning: Guidelines for Educators*, Sydney: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Copying Permitted

© Copyright on this item is held by NZCER and ACER who grant to all people actively engaged in education the right to copy it in the interests of better teaching; simply acknowledge the source.